

ACADEMIC BOARD

DISCUSSION PAPER

Background

1. The Role of Academic Board and the 2005 AUQA Audit

While the role of Academic Boards has not been prescribed in detail by government, the first round of AUQA audits tended to be critical. The role of the Board in structures of governance was often unclear; and the effectiveness of Boards in reviewing standards and monitoring policy was questioned (Dooley, 2007). Boards did not seem to live up to expectations. But expectations of what?

Perhaps the most coherent general statement of their purpose comes from the 2005 National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards & Senates which formulated a policy paper where the Mission of Boards was given as “the principal policy-making and advisory body on all matters relating to and affecting a university’s teaching, research and educational programs. It is also responsible for assuring academic quality including academic freedom, academic integrity, assessment, admissions and research conduct”. This statement is helpful in crystallising the role of Boards as the senior academic policy making and monitoring body within universities.

In AUQA’s review of La Trobe University, Recommendation 2 dealt with policy (including academic policies). It stated “AUQA recommends that La Trobe University develop a comprehensive framework for the development, approval, dissemination, monitoring and review of policies that takes into account appropriate delegations to faculties and campuses.” Given the Board’s responsibility for academic policies, it follows that Academic Board must meet the challenges contained in this recommendation.

Recommendation:

That La Trobe should act in keeping with the mainstream view amongst Australian universities, affirm Academic Board as the principal academic policy making and advisory body, and require Academic Board to assist in remedying the weaknesses identified by AUQA. Several changes follow from this.

2. Statutory objectives and terms of reference of the Board

Academic Board’s role should be properly defined by Statute. The Academic Board is governed by the *La Trobe University Act 1964*, Statute 7 – *The Academic Board* and Regulation 7.1 – *Composition, procedure and election of Academic Board*.

The *La Trobe University Act 1964* states:

- (3) The Academic Board—
(a) may make to the Council any recommendation about the academic affairs of the University and in particular may make to the Council such recommendations as it thinks proper with respect to instruction, studies and examinations, research, admission to degrees, diplomas and other awards, and discipline in the University;
(b) shall report to the Council on all matters submitted to it by the Council for report;

Recommendation:

That the following terms of reference be established for Academic Board:

- Academic Board is responsible for approving and monitoring the implementation of policy on academic matters including admission to degrees, diplomas and other awards; new and revised programs; teaching and learning; assessment; student conduct; research; reviews of courses and academic units; academic staff promotions and senior (Level D & Level E) academic appointments; and prizes and scholarships.
- Academic Board will consider and advise the Vice-Chancellor and the University Council on academic matters and any other broad issues which affect the academic excellence of the University.
- Academic Board will provide a forum to facilitate information flow and debate within the University.

3. Academic Policy

A cursory examination of existing policies suggests:

- A useful distinction between academic and administrative policies has already been established.
- There exists no complete central library or directory of existing academic policies on the Website.
- There are gaps in policy (notably in learning & teaching).
- Existing policies generally:
 - fail to distinguish policy and procedure
 - use no template for title, date, authority and review date
 - are advisory rather than directive
 - lack brevity
- Policies also fail to identify responsible officers and the frequency and nature of monitoring.

Following from AUQA Recommendation (2), the Vice-Principal (Resources and Administration) established a Working Party to develop a comprehensive framework for the development, approval, dissemination, monitoring and review of policies.

The Working Party developed a policy framework for consideration by Academic Board (please refer to paper AB08/54).

Recommendations:

- (a) That all existing academic policies be audited by a small working party.
- (b) That the Academic Board endorses the recommendations contained in paper AB08/54 related to the development and implementation of a policy framework.

4. Academic Board Committee structure

To make and monitor policy efficiently, Academic Board depends on its Committees. The present Academic Board committee structure was established in 1992 and, apart from the disbanding of two of its original policy committees (Committee for External Programs and University Development Committee), has not been reviewed since.

Academic Board currently has three main policy committees:

- Academic Committee
- Research and Graduate Studies Committee
- Selection and Enrolment Committee

Academic Board also has six sub-committees which report to these policy committees, twelve specific purpose committees and three joint (with Council) committees, as listed below:

Sub Committees of Policy Committees of Academic Board:

- Animal Ethics Committee
- Genetic Manipulation Supervisory Committee
- Higher Degrees Committee (Research)
- Honours Year Grants Committee
- Human Ethics Committee
- Publications Committee

Specific Purpose Committees of Academic Board:

- Academic Progress Review Committee
- Faculty Academic Promotions Committees
- Academic Misconduct Review Committee
- Committee of Inquiry
- Committee on Outside Studies Programs
- Higher Degrees Appeals Committee
- Higher Doctorates Committee
- Library Committee
- Selection Committee for Personal Chairs
- Standing Committee Level D Academics
- Community Awards Committee
- Standing Committee on Level E Academics

Joint Committees of Academic Board and Council:

- Committee for Emeritus Professors and Scholars
- Honorary Degrees Committee
- Committee on Intellectual Property

Comparisons with other universities suggest scope for both rationalisation of minor committees, and some expansion to accommodate developing activities or to expedite business. Notably innovations elsewhere include the use of a "Standing Committee" to handle urgent business, and a "Teaching & Learning Committee" separate from any "Academic Programs Committee".

Issues:

- Should a small "Standing Committee" (Chair, Deputy Chair, Assistant Deputy Chair) be established to handle urgent business?
- Should an additional policy committee, the Learning and Teaching Committee, be established?
- Should the University Academic Committee be renamed the "Academic Programs Committee"?
- A review is required of the many existing committees. Do they all perform their functions? Do they fulfil their reporting requirements?

Recommendation:

That the Chair, Academic Board, establish a Working Party to review the Academic Board committee structure and address the issues noted above. The Working Party will review terms of reference, membership, sub-committee structures and reporting guidelines and provide recommendations to Academic Board. The Working Party will comprise the Chair, Academic Board; Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic); Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research); and two members of Academic Board who have been involved in one of the three main policy committees.

5. Officers of Academic Board

Several universities make provision for a Deputy Chair and Assistant Deputy Chair, Academic Board, for the periods when the Chair is unable to fulfil his/her duties. In many instances, the Deputy Chair and Assistant Deputy Chair are also chairs of major policy committees.

Recommendations:

- (a) That provision be made in legislation for an elected Deputy Chair and Assistant Deputy Chair of Academic Board.
- (b) The Deputy Chair and Assistant Deputy Chair be assigned to chair major policy committees of Academic Board.

6. Stimulating debate

For some years, debate has faltered in the Academic Boards of many universities as business is handled by sub-committees and reports from senior executive have come to dominate proceedings.

Several universities have sought to stimulate debate by introducing discussions on "hot topics". La Trobe did so in 2006 with some success. However, comments have been expressed that the "hot topics" are not connected to policy proposals or decisions.

A partial solution can be found by linking "hot topics" to performance reports tabled by the policy committees responsible for policy in the major areas of admission, teaching and learning and research. Those performance reports can fulfil the requirement on committees to report to Academic Board on the monitoring of policy. They also "close the cycle" in routine quality assurance. In addition they reinforce targets set in the Strategic Plan. Finally, they serve to inform the Board upon the University's performance on key performance indicators, and to stimulate debate about means of improvement.

Recommendation:

A schedule of debates is to be planned linked to reporting the key performance indicators on admission, teaching & learning, and research designated in the University Strategic Plan.

Recommendations

Academic Board is invited to endorse the following recommendations:

1. That La Trobe should act in keeping with the mainstream view amongst Australian universities, affirm Academic Board as the principal academic policy making and advisory body, and require Academic Board to assist in remedying the weaknesses identified by AUQA. Several changes follow from this.
2. That the following terms of reference be established for Academic Board:
 - Academic Board is responsible for approving and monitoring the implementation of policy on academic matters including admission to degrees, diplomas and other awards; new and revised programs; teaching and learning; assessment; student conduct; research; reviews of courses and academic units; academic staff promotions and senior (Level D & Level E) academic appointments; and prizes and scholarships.
 - Academic Board will consider and advise the Vice-Chancellor and the University Council on academic matters and any other broad issues which affect the academic excellence of the University.
 - Academic Board will provide a forum to facilitate information flow and debate within the University.
3. (a) That all existing academic policies be audited by a small working party.
(b) That the Academic Board endorses the recommendations contained in paper AB08/54 related to the development and implementation of a policy framework.

4. That the Chair, Academic Board, establish a Working Party to review the Academic Board committee structure and address the issues noted above. The Working Party will review terms of reference, membership, sub-committee structures and reporting guidelines and provide recommendations to Academic Board. The Working Party will comprise the Chair, Academic Board; Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic); Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research); and two members of Academic Board who have been involved in one of the three main policy committees.
5.
 - (a) That provision be made in legislation for an elected Deputy Chair and Assistant Deputy Chair of Academic Board.
 - (b) The Deputy Chair and Assistant Deputy Chair be assigned to chair major policy committees of Academic Board.
6. A schedule of debates is to be planned linked to reporting the key performance indicators on admission, teaching & learning, and research designated in the University Strategic Plan.